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### **Local High School Student Experiences Marine Science Firsthand at Woods Hole Science Aquarium**

They came from diverse educational and family backgrounds and from states across the nation, but for Ellen Gawarkiewicz of Falmouth, Mass., one of the 11 high school and college students who spent the summer working or volunteering at the Woods Hole Science Aquarium (WHSA), it has been a summer to remember.

"I had no idea what I was getting into, but it was so much fun," Gawarkiewicz says of her five-week internship at the aquarium. "But I especially loved working with the young kids who visit and come to the touch tanks."

The Falmouth High School senior plans to pursue a career in marine biology or marine environmental education, and always thought working at the aquarium would be a dream job. Despite growing up in Falmouth and visiting the aquarium often with her family and with school groups, she admits she never realized what went into running a facility that welcomes 100,000 visitors a year, many of them children.

The Woods Hole Science Aquarium (WHSA) is the oldest continuously operating research aquarium in the United States, with a mission to do research, education and conservation, especially with seals and turtles. As one of eight high school students and three college interns at the facility this summer, she learned plenty about seals through feeding, training and enrichment activities with the WHSA's two resident harbor seals, LuSeal and Bumper.

Feeding the fish, training the harbor seals, cleaning tanks, leading shoreside collecting trips for the public, and helping children and adults learn about marine animals at the touch tanks were all part of her daily routine. "I was so excited to come to work each day," she said "Each day was different and it was so much fun. I especially loved working with the children."

The WHSA offers two summer programs for high school students who have completed grade 10 or higher, a five-week internship and a two-week career seminar in late July. Both programs are run by the WHSA staff, and are projects of NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center and the neighboring private, nonprofit Marine Biological Laboratory. A longer paid internship for college students is also offered.

Gawarkiewicz participated in the five-week volunteer internship program for high school students June 30 through August 1. The annual program provides students with the opportunity to work with a professional staff caring for a collection of about 140 species of fish and invertebrates common to the continental shelf from Maine to North Carolina, harbor seals, and sometimes sea turtles held for rehabilitation and eventual release. The interns learn about marine animal husbandry, aquarium operations, conservation, and public education. They are also trained to serve as assistant naturalists on public collecting walks to local harbors and estuaries.

“It is so cool to feed the seals, which I watched for years as a visitor,” she said. “I also love the collecting trips, where we go to local harbors and beaches to collect specimens for the tanks and just to learn about the marine life in local waters. It is nice to be able to share what I learned about the animals with the young kids on the beach who see us collecting and ask questions, and with the children who visit the touch tanks.”

Part of her internship included participating in the two-week Careers in Marine Science Seminar July 21 to August 1, along with seven other high school students from California, Utah, New York and Massachusetts. The career seminar students get training in marine animal husbandry and basic aquarist chores, hear presentations from scientists working in a variety of marine fields, go on collecting trips, visit other Woods Hole science institutions, and go on field trips to the New Bedford and Nantucket.

The seminar program is designed to give students an idea of what people working in Woods Hole do and how different areas of science contribute to the larger effort to understand the marine world and to manage marine resources wisely.

The group was kept busy during the day and enjoyed many activities together at night and on weekends, from playing soccer and seeing the latest Batman film at the local theater to a bonfire on the beach. They even spent a “Night at the Aquarium,” eating pizza, playing games and sleeping on the conference room floor.

As a senior at Falmouth High School this fall, Ellen will have a full schedule. She has been class president since 2007, is a member of the National Honor Society, the music and math honor societies, and is a member of the Key, Creative Writing, Ecology and French clubs as well as the chamber music ensemble. She earned a first place award in the Falmouth Community Science Fairs in 2006, 2007 and 2008. This past year she did her research project for the science fair at the WHSA, focusing on the prey response to echolocation and vocalization capabilities of marine mammals.

When not busy with a demanding class schedule and school activities, Gawarkiewicz tutors second grade math students and teaches flute to fourth graders. She enjoys hiking, biking and kayaking, works part-time at the Falmouth Cinema Pub, and volunteers in church and community activities.

“I learned so much about fish this summer,” she said. “I had never been to Nantucket until our field trip to the aquarium there a few weeks ago, and we visited the Marine

Resource Center at the Marine Biological Laboratory to see how they culture marine animals for research.”

One thing is certain: she will never look at the WHSA the same way again. “I appreciate it much more now that I have had the opportunity to get behind the scenes and see how much effort goes into running the facility. And I know for sure that I want to work with students in some type of outreach program like this in the future.”

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